Chapter 10
THE GARDEN BANQUET IS ALL ANYONE CAN TALK ABOUT LATELY!
SPEAKING OF WHICH, THE JADE PALACE IS WHERE YOU WORK NOW, RIGHT?
MM.
GASP ふんす
GASP ふんす
OOOOOH!
THAT'S WHERE THE LADY'S MAID WHO ATE THE POISON IS TOO!
EAGER わくわく
EAGER わくわく
EAGER わくわく
...IT IS...
HOW DID SHE FIND THAT OUT?

XIAOLAN WOULD PROBABLY NEVER GUESS THAT SAID MAID WAS SITTING RIGHT BESIDE HER.
THAT'S A VERY GOOD QUES-TION.
...NO IDEA.
SHE CAN'T BE JUST A REGULAR GIRL!
WHAT KIND OF PERSON IS SHE?
NOM
AND HERE I WAS HOPING I'D GET TO FIND OUT LOTS ABOUT HER FROM YOU!
AWW, REALLY? POOH!
I'M JUST A LOWLY NEW-COMER, AFTER ALL.
NOPE, NOT A THING!
DON'T YOU WORK WITH HER, THOUGH?
ISN'T THERE ANYTHING YOU CAN TELL ME?
...TURNED INTO A RATHER SIGNIFI-CANT AFFAIR.
IT WOULD SEEM THE ATTEMPTED POISONING FUROR AT THE GARDEN BANQUET...

Chapter 10
The Meaning of the Hairpins

DID YOU GET ANY HAIRPINS OR OTHER ORNAMENTS DURING THE BANQUET?
A FEW.

A MAN'S HAIRPIN FROM THAT RAKISH EUNUCH.
A HAIRPIN WITH RED CRYSTALS FROM CONSORT LIHUA.
THE NECKLACE FROM CONSORT GYOKUYO.
...I RECEIVED ONE OF THE HAIRPINS HE WAS HANDING OUT TO ALL AND SUNDRY.
LASTLY, FROM A MILITARY OFFICER BY THE NAME OF LI HAKU...
SO FOUR, IN TOTAL.

THAT MEANS YOU CAN LEAVE THE INNER COURT!
OHH, HOW NICE!
HUH?!
WAIT, WHAT ...?
HMM?
ISN'T THAT HOW IT WORKS?

NOW THAT I THINK OF IT...
GASP
SILLY ME.
I SHOULD'VE LISTENED MORE CLOSELY.
DEPRESSED
SO THAT'S WHAT SHE MEANT ...
YINGHUA WAS GOING ON AND ON ABOUT SOMETHING LIKE THAT AT THE BANQUET.
PLAYING DEAD
I SAID THERE MIGHT BE ULTERIOR MEANINGS BEHIND THEEEM!
YOU CAN COUNT ON ME FOR INFO!
PAT
GLINT
007
XIAO-LAN.
TELL ME EVERY-THING.
OOH!
LOOKS LIKE I'VE REELED YOU IN FOR ONCE!

YOU KNOW HOW THE INNER COURT IS OFF-LIMITS TO MOST MEN...
...SO WE LADIES WHO LIVE AND WORK HERE CAN'T HAVE MALE VISITORS?
WELL, WITH SPECIAL PERMIS-SION...
...A MAN OUTSIDE THE INNER COURT CAN SUMMON A WOMAN FROM THE INSIDE.
Hmm.
SO THAT'S WHAT THE HAIRPINS DISTRIBUTED AT THE BANQUET REPRESENT.
THAT'S RIGHT!
IT WORKS THE OTHER WAY TOO.
A COURT LADY CAN USE ONE OF THOSE HAIRPINS TO SEND FOR A MAN...
...AND REQUEST A LEAVE FROM THE INNER COURT.

GRIN
THANK YOU SO MUCH, XIAOLAN.
I'LL GIVE IT A TRY.
STAND
GYURR GWEWW-KUM. (YOU'RE WELCOME.)
OH, HEY, MAO-MAO!
THANKS FOR THE HAWTHORN FRUITS!
THEY'RE DELICIOUS!

SHE TOLD ME SHE WAS SOLD OFF BY HER PARENTS AND ENDED UP AT THE INNER COURT.
...HAILS FROM A POOR FARMING VILLAGE.
THE EVER CHEERFUL AND CHATTY XIAOLAN...
SHE'S ALWAYS SEEMED TO ENJOY HER LIFE HERE.
YOU THINK?
Hmmm
THE INNER COURT IS LIKE PARA-DISE!
HEARTFELT
AS LONG AS YOU DO YOUR WORK, YOU NEVER HAVE TO WORRY ABOUT GOING HUNGRY HERE.
...THE INNER COURT MIGHT NOT BE SO BAD A PLACE AT ALL.
DEPENDING ON YOUR SITUATION...
BUT THAT'S NOT THE CASE FOR ME.

A MES-SAGE ...?
LI HAKU, SIR.
THIS CAME FOR YOU FROM ONE OF THE LADIES OF THE INNER COURT.
UUUGH...
OH BOY.
DID A LADY FROM THE BANQUET TAKE MY OBLIGATORY HAIRPIN IN EARNEST?
THANK YOU.
BOW
ペコ

SIR LI HAKU! ♡ TAKE ME AWAY FROM HERE, WON'T YOU?!
もん MULL
MULL もん
チラッ GLANCE
BUT IT'D BE A SHAME TO TURN HER DOWN IF SHE'S A BEAUTY.
THE JADE PALACE? I GAVE A HAIRPIN TO ONLY ONE WOMAN FROM THERE.
Jade Palace Mao
THAT MEANS ...
SO THIS IS FROM HER, HUH?

NOW, HOW TO LET HER DOWN GENTLY ...?
HELLO.
ペコリ
BOW
SORRY TO KEEP YOU WAITING.
HM?

I GET THAT A LOT.
WHO'RE YOU?
HMM, I CAN KINDA SEE IT?
THINKING BACK ON IT, PERHAPS THERE'S A LIKENESS?
THIS IS THE WOMAN WHO SMILED SO BEWITCH-INGLY WITH POISON ON HER TONGUE?
I GET THAT A LOT TOO.
HAS ANYONE EVER TOLD YOU THAT, IN MAKEUP, YOU LOOK LIKE AN ENTIRELY DIFFERENT PERSON?

57

SIGH
BAM
WELL, YOU DO REALIZE WHAT IT MEANS...
...FOR YOU TO HAVE SUMMONED ME HERE, DON'T YOU?
YES, I DO.
COOLLY
I WISH TO VISIT MY FAMILY.

I'M TOLD THAT IF YOU VOUCH FOR ME...
...I MAY BE ABLE TO MAKE A BRIEF TRIP HOME.
ANNOYED
SO YOU'RE INSISTING I HELP YOU?
HMPH!
SEETHE
SEETHE
YOU'RE EITHER BOLD...
...OR YOU'RE CRAZY.

SO... WHAT?
I'M S'POSED TO JUST LET YOU USE ME OUT OF THE GOODNESS OF MY HEART...
...SO YOU CAN SKIP ON BACK HOME?

WHAT COULD A MAID POSSIBLY HAVE THAT AN OFFICER WOULD WANT?
NOT AT ALL.
I HAVE COME UP WITH WHAT I BELIEVE WILL BE SUITABLE COMPEN-SATION.

BAM
Verdigris Letter of Introduction
Meimei
SHP
HOW WOULD YOU LIKE...
...TO TAKE IN THE FLOWERS AT VERDI-GRIS?

VERDI-GRIS? SURELY YOU JEST!
THAT'S A HIGH-END BROTHEL! ONE NIGHT THERE, AND I'D BE BROKE!
IF THAT CONCERNS YOU, SIMPLY SHOW THEM THESE LETTERS OF INTRO-DUCTION.
梅
梅
Meimei
MEI-MEI.
女華
Jo
JOKA.
PAI-LING.
Pailing

THIS MAKES ME EVEN MORE SKEPTI-CAL.
AREN'T THESE THE THREE PRINCESSES, WHO ARE PRACTICALLY OUT OF REACH FOR EVEN HIGH-RANKING MINISTERS?

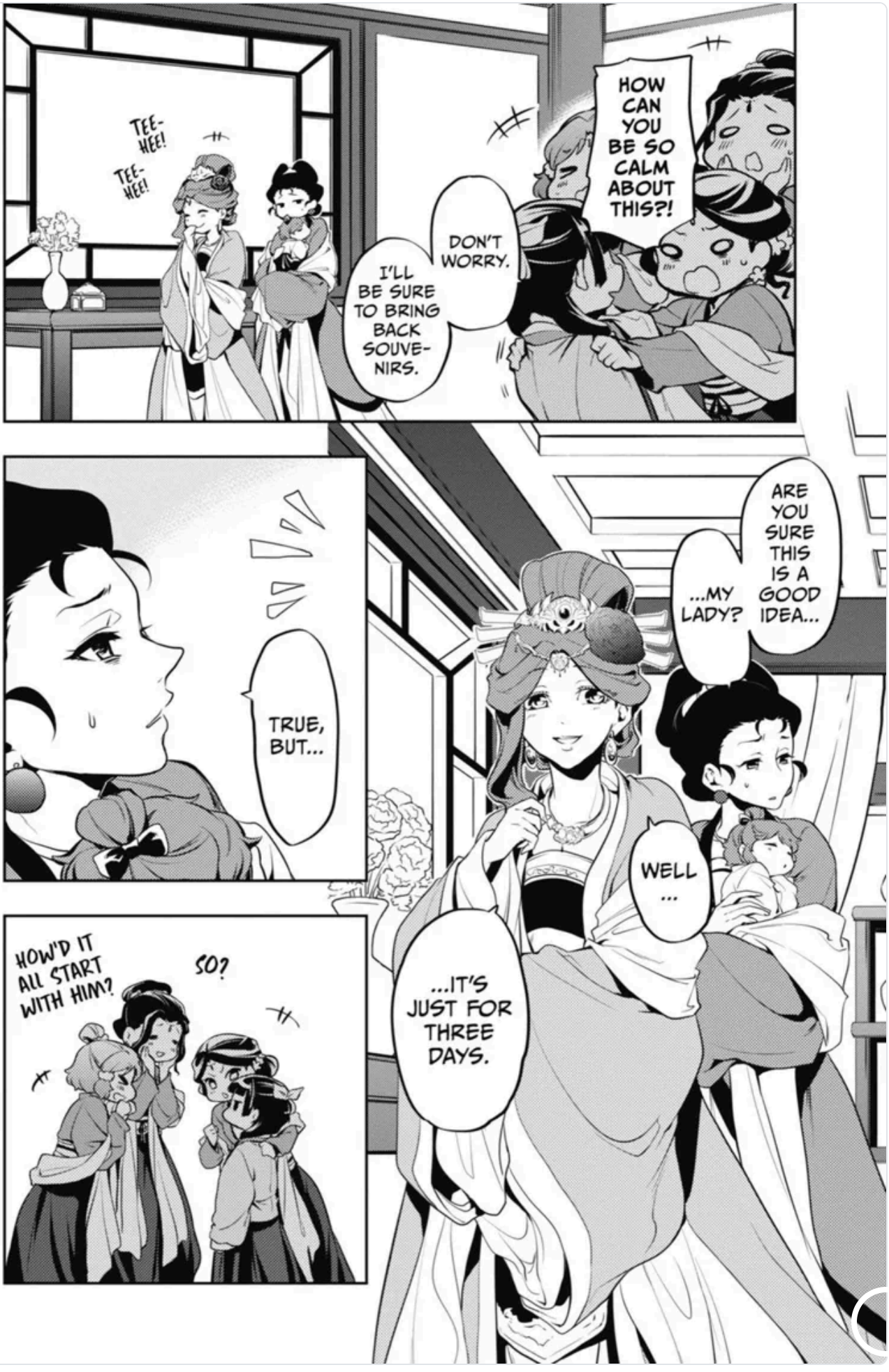
HUH?
I APOLO-GIZE...
...FOR WASTING YOUR TIME.
SMOOTHLY
IF YOU DON'T BELIEVE ME, THEN I GUESS THAT'S THAT.
I GUESS I'LL JUST HAVE TO ASK SOMEONE ELSE.
SHIP
IT'S REALLY TOO BAD.
RUSTLE
RUSTLE
WHAT DO YOU MEAN?

THIS WOMAN ...
HEH! HEH! HEH!
SHE HAS OTHER OPTIONS?!
ガビーン SHOCK
GLITTER キラ
キラ GLITTER
GLITTER キラ
DOOM
A HAIRPIN WITH RED CRYSTALS AND ONE MADE OF SILVER?!
...THEY'RE CLEARLY HIGHER IN RANK THAN ME, WHOEVER THEY ARE.

...IS ACTUALLY A FORCE TO BE RECKONED WITH?
IN WHICH CASE, THERE MAY BE SOME TRUTH TO THIS.
MAYBE I'M JUST IN THE DARK ABOUT HER...
...AND THIS YOUNG GIRL...
BUT IF IT IS TRUE ...
...A ONCE-IN-A-LIFETIME CHANCE TO MEET THE THREE PRINCESS-ES...
...LIES BEFORE ME...
NO, NO. I STILL HAVE MY DOUBTS.
THIS OFFER IS JUST TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE.
RGH!
WHAT DO I DO?!

SHP
すっ
WELL?
WHAT DO YOU SAY?
CHACHING
ちゃきっ
...YOU WIN.
DIIING
沈
DROOP

CON-
GRATS,
MAO-
MAO!
I'M SO
HAPPY
FOR
YOU!
TO
THINK
YOU'D
BEAT US
TO THE
PUNCH!
I'M
SO GLAD
YOU MET
SOMEONE
WONDER-
FUL!
BUT I
SUPPOSE
AGE
DOESN'T
MATTER!
?
THANK
YOU.


TEE-HEE!
TEE-HEE!
HOW CAN YOU BE SO CALM ABOUT THIS?!
DON'T WORRY.
I'LL BE SURE TO BRING BACK SOUVE-NIRS.
ARE YOU SURE THIS IS A GOOD IDEA...
...MY LADY?
WELL ...
...IT'S JUST FOR THREE DAYS.
TRUE, BUT...
HOW'D IT ALL START WITH HIM?
SO?

ONE LOOK AT HER...
ぼけ OBLIVIOUS
JUST KINDA HAPPENED...
...AND IT'S OBVIOUS SHE HAS NO IDEA WHAT THE HAIRPINS TRULY MEAN.
BUT, YOU KNOW ...
...THERE'S SOMEONE ELSE WE SHOULD FEEL TRULY SORRY FOR.
YES. YOU'RE QUITE RIGHT.
(NOOON! YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE COY!!
AAAAH...

ACHOO
OOO!
.....IS IT TOO DUSTY IN HERE?
WHISPER
THE OUTCOME OF THIS WILL BE MOST AMUSING, I'M SURE!
HEE HEE HEE!
...THIS IS GOING TO CAUSE ANOTHER SQUABBLE.
I HAVE A BAD FEEL-ING...